REGION 6 REGIONAL RESPONSE TEAM (RRT)
SEMI - ANNUAL REPORT

Period: January, 1991 – June, 1991

SUMMARY OF MAJOR ACTIVITIES

A. SIGNIFICANT INCIDENTS

1. On February 4, 1991 about 2300 gallons of crude oil were discharged from a wellhead operated by Texaco into the southeast portion of Lake Salvador, located south of New Orleans, Louisiana. The spill, though minor in size, resulted in the death of over 1000 birds near the state owned Salvador Wildlife Management Area. The birds most likely died from complications associated with exposure to oil.

2. On May 5, 1991 the Coast Guard Marine Safety Office in New Orleans received notification of a collision in the Mississippi River near Baton Rouge, Louisiana between the towboat ARGONAUT with 26 barges in tow and the towboat WHIPPERWILL with a tow of three barges loaded with toluene.

   As a result of the collision, the tank barge JACK under tow by the WHIPPERWILL lost about 23,000 gallons of toluene when the number one port cargo tank was damaged. Due to the high river stage and the nature of the product, cleanup was not feasible. The remaining product on the tank barge JACK was safely off-loaded.

3. On June 7, 1991 a 10 inch crude oil pipeline located near Knox City, Texas fractured after the ground supporting it was worn away by the changing Brazos River. About 84,000 gallons of crude oil was discharged into the Brazos River. Nearly 74 miles of the river was effected.

   The leading edge was contained at a point where Goose Creek meets the Brazos River. This spill clearly demonstrated the problem associated with the aging infrastructure supporting our oil industry.

4. Throughout the year we continued to find filled 55 gallon drums that had washed up along the Texas shoreline each potentially containing hazardous substances. Drums on federal land are recovered by the National Park Service in accordance with a Memorandum of Understanding between the National Park Service, the EPA and the USCG.

   That MOU also directed the Region VI RRT to work with the state of Texas to have the state recover drums found on state beaches.

   In the interim the Coast Guard Marine Safety Offices in Corpus Christi and Galveston, Texas continue to contract for pickup of the high profile barrels of unknown product on a case by case basis. The state of Texas through the Texas Water Commission has also conducted some recovery of drums.

5. On June 25, 1991 an oil spill was discovered in the inland zone at the OME Corporation near Houston, Texas. The OME Corporation facility is located on the San Jacinto River, near Channelview, Texas. The valves to several storage tanks were apparently opened by vandals. Each of these tanks contained more than 84,000 gallons of crude oil.

Initially, it was thought that only 2-3,000 gallons of oil had entered the water; however, that was soon upgraded. The U.S. Coast Guard Marine Safety Office Houston initially responded to the incident and notified EPA Region VI of the spill.

The owner assumed responsibility and hired a contractor to conduct the cleanup. More than 84,000 gallons of oil were recovered from the land around the storage tanks and approximately 21,000 gallons of oil were recovered from the water using skimmers and sorbent materials.

MSO Houston, EPA Region VI, The Texas Water Commission, the Texas General Land Office and the Harris County Pollution Control Office all had representatives on scene during various phases of this cleanup operation.

Natural Resource trustee agencies including the DOI, DOC-NOAA, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Texas Water Commission and Texas General Land Office were also on scene to provide Emergency Response Advice and initiate the Natural Resource Damage Assessment process.

By June 26th the marsh area appeared heavily oiled for about 750 meters west of the facility. The oil had flowed from earthen berms around the facility into a drainage ditch along a service road and into the marsh.

The marsh area was considered an environmentally sensitive area. It was determined that an intrusive mechanical cleanup operation would not be practicable in this instance. High and low water flushing with the potential for bioremediation as an alternative appeared the best cleanup procedures.

An incident specific meeting of the RRT by telephone was convened on June 26, 1991 to discuss the potential use of bioremediation as a tool to cleanup the oil in the marsh area. It was determined that water flushing would continue for two more days and if the marsh remained heavily oiled, bioremediation would be considered.

On June 28 the RRT met by telephone to review the use of bioremediation. Approval was granted for bioremediation contingent upon the Texas General Land Office developing a monitoring and sampling protocol.

The required protocols were developed by the Texas Water Commission and submitted on June 29. At first light, on June 29th the TGLO and TWC staffs determined that the high tide and previous days water washing had removed nearly all the oil. In this specific case nature's own cleansing process had removed the need for further consideration of bioremediation.

6. On July 24, 1991, medical infectious waste began showing up on the Neuces County Beach in the Gulf of Mexico South of the Padre Island National Seashore. The waste was described as an assortment of IV bags, rubber gloves, syringes, insulin bottles, antibiotic bottles, needles and pills.

   The Coast Guard MSO investigators relayed information to the Texas Department of Health. Neuces County personnel conducted cleanup of the Neuces County beaches. The Texas Water Commission was notified as were several other state agencies in order to find someone who would respond to the other impacted beaches outside Neuces County.

   It was determined on July 26, 1991, that Kleberg County Health Officials would respond. Medical waste continued to show up in the general area of Mustang and Padre Islands for the next few days. No source was identified. By July 31, 1991 no new medical waste material was observed on the beaches and the removal of the medical wastes was completed.

7. The USCG Marine Safety Office New Orleans continues to actively deal with the problem of abandoned vessels that contain oil or hazardous substances. Substantial expenditures of federal funds have resulted from these projects.

The scope of the problem and the potential threat to the environment prompted an extensive search effort in conjunction the Coast Guard Air Station in New Orleans. This effort was dubbed "Operation Snakepit".

Its purpose was to determine how many barges or other abandoned sites were threatening our rivers, lakes, bayous and marshes. The goal was to quantify the threat to the environment and to develop a plan to address it in a proactive manner.

Operation Snakepit has surveyed the highest probability parts of the MSO New Orleans zone. Coast Guard aircraft, including those of the local Auxiliary Squadron, were used to scour a twenty thousand square mile area. This was divided into a grid of 66 sectors measuring 18 by 18 miles each.

Over an eleven month period 165 abandoned barges, 276 tanks and 109 waste pits were identified. The tanks and pits have been abandoned from various oil exploration and production projects.

The investigating teams could see that some of the sites were actively polluting the environment during the course of the aerial survey. One notable site near Hahnville Louisiana, was discovered in early June 1990. Several barges at this site were found to be holding waste oil from prior barge cleaning operations.

As the investigators made their way through the underbrush at the site, more barges were discovered, bringing the total of barges to seven. The current owner of the site agreed to cleanup the property and remove the barges.

This effort was monitored by personnel from MSO New Orleans and the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality. By the first week of 1991, it was clear that the rapidly rising river was threatening to cause a significant spill. The OSC partially federalized the cleanup on January 4, 1991 and over $400,000 from the Oil Fund was used to build a containment barrier around one of the barges.

There were other cleanup operations at federal expense to remove sufficient oil and hazardous materials to reduce or eliminate the environmental threat only to find that through illegal dumping activities the barges had again been filled.

As the number of sites began to grow a task force was formed with MSO New Orleans, EPA Region 6, the Eighth Coast Guard District, the Atlantic Area Strike Team, the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality and the Louisiana State Police to formulate a plan addressing possible courses of action, including containment, testing, cleanup, removal and disposal of pollutants.

The ultimate goal was to find ways to get rid of the barges after cleanup was complete.

The abandoned barge task force indicated a need for a more in-depth assessment of the problem. In September 1990 they agreed to conduct a multi-phased operation to locate, identify, test and develop a strategy for possible cleanup and disposal of the wastes in a sampling of 20 barges considered to present the greatest threat to the public health or the environment.

In phase one, the barges selected from Operation Snakepit were visited by a team of Coast Guard and EPA personnel.

The primary objective was to determine the identity of the barge owners from information on the barge and to confirm by outward appearance, when possible, the status and appearance of the barges. Phase two validated their abandoned status and attempted to identify ownership by a search of available records.

This effort started in December 1990 and continued for several months. Phase three, the sampling phase, started in April 1991. Finally, in phase Four, removal priorities will be developed and conducted.

On the financial side, since the cost for removal and disposal of the barges is potentially great, the Coast Guard team tried to cleanup the barge contents while leaving the barge in place. Recent experience has shown us that this course of action will only allow illegal dumpers to discharge their wastes in the barges that have been cleaned.

In addition to the Hahnville, Louisiana site described earlier in this report, other ongoing activities include:

a. The tank barges NATCHEZ & MK 450 located in the Harvey Canal near New Orleans. Both barges contain a waste oil and have been the object of two prior removal actions.

b. The tank barges Z-62 and Ingalls No. 1 located near Empire, Louisiana containing a waste oil/hazardous substance mixture.

B. SIMULATIONS EXERCISES HELD

1. On May 14th and 15th, 1991 the RRT participated in the Louisiana Offshore Oil Port (LOOP) exercise, which included as an objective, a test of the dispersant use plan approved by the Region VI RRT.

   Representatives of the Coast Guard, EPA, Department of the Interior, Department of Commerce, and Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality participated during the course of this one-day exercise. The exercise was successful in identifying several necessary modifications to theplan to make it more effective.

   It clearly demonstrated that the plan can be used to deliver dispersants when required within the specific parameters of the RRT's approval.

2. This RRT participated in several other tabletop exercises with Exxon, Chevron and other oil companies by telephone when they simulated requests for dispersants, bioremediation and other new technologies during the course of the specific exercise scenario.

   The exercises clearly demonstrate a need fora mechanism to more rapidly respond to requests for approval on the part of the RRT and the need to provide the industry with a better understanding of the information the RRTrequires in order to grant approval.

C. RRT / JRT MEETINGS

1. From February 20-22, 1991 the Region 6 Semiannual Regional Response Team Meeting was held in Hot Springs, Arkansas. The minutes are forwarded as an enclosure.

2. As discussed at the Hot Springs meeting, the RRT implemented the first of regular teleconferences on May 25, 1991, to discuss Management, Preparedness and Training Committee Issues. The minutes are forwarded as an enclosure.

3. On June 8, 1991 an incident specific RRT was called to discuss the Diamond Shamrock Spill on the Brazos River in Texas. The minutes are forwarded as an enclosure.

4. A pre-semiannual meeting RRT teleconference was held on July 8, 1991, to discuss issues for the next RRT meeting. The minutes are forwarded as an enclosure.

5. No JRT meetings were held during this period.

D. NATURAL RESOURCE TRUSTEE ACTIVITIES

Within this RRT Region, Federal and State natural resource trustee agencies are currently involved in implementing the Natural Resource Damage Assessment Process at 19 Superfund and oil spill sites. Natural resource damage claims will result in the development of restoration projects to restore injured natural resources as a result of discharges of-oil or hazardous substances at these sites.

II. LESSONS LEARNED

1. As evidenced during the Lake Salvador incident, even minor oil spills can have significant impacts on the environment and closer liaison between the OSC and the trustees is critical to a good evaluation of the problems presented by every oil spill.

2. The information exchanged with ot'hers in the community during the previously noted events, clearly indicates a need for the RRT to exchange information during non spill events with our counterparts in the spill response community through workshops, seminars and exercises.

3. There is a need to find a method to remove abandoned tank vessels, barges, and shore retention tanks to eliminate their potential as waste dump sites.

4. There is a need to improve our knowledge base and experience regarding bioremediation and dispersant application.

5. During the Brazos River spill, the RRT was reminded of the aging pipeline infrastructure supporting our nations oil industry and the need to consider the threat posed by these aging oil pipelines.

6. Appropriate notification of the trustees has not occurred at times. Although this is an infrequent occurrence, it is critical to the ability of the trustees to contribute to the response. There is a need to develop a consistent notification process for all spills regardless of who serves as OSC. Notification procedures are currently being addressed by the RRT.

III. ISSUES REQUIRING NRT ACTION/STUDY

1. New Technologies - The OSCs and the RRTs require a usable base of scientific information concerning dispersants, bioremediation, in-situ burning and other new technologies, if they are going to be able to make the time critical decisions required of them by the National Contingency Plan.

   The NRT should be pushing to expand the level of information presently available to the end users through encouraging laboratory studies, tests on spills of opportunity and open water testing of new technologies so we can have a real understanding of their potential.

2. Aging Infra-Structure - The oil industry in the United States continues to suffer a downturn that has seen the abandonment of facilities and vessels along with an aging transportation system.

Major corporations have been selling off their least profitable facilities to marginal operators who try to squeeze a profit out of these aging facilities. Often the marginal operators end up abandoning the facility. The abandoned vessels, pipelines and collection facilities are going to be an increasing concern in the years ahead.

At this point we are raising the issue with the NRT to provide an awareness of this problem. Congressional interest is high and there is a likelihood of significant future expenditures of federal funds.